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ABSTRACT

One urgent practical problem faced by speech communication educators is the need to educate students with a serious concern for their subsequent employability. The shrinking academic job market for speech communication graduates is a reality with which speech communication educators must be concerned. Speech communicators are beginning to ask critical questions about alternative career opportunities for graduates, how to educate students to take advantage of those opportunities, and the impact of new training programs on current courses of study. A major effort is needed to explore these matters and to decide on a national scale what action should be taken. Another urgent problem for speech communicators is the need to face up to continued and serious questions raised by university administrators about the uniqueness of speech communication and its particular place in the curriculum. Professional meetings and conventions provide an opportunity for speech communicators to develop key concepts for their discipline and to discuss fundamental questions and values. In such serious colloquy, answers may be found to the questions of administrators. (GW)

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ON "ACKNOWLEDGING" PROBLEMS AND "IMPLEMENTING" SOLUTIONS

Jane Blankenship

Eastern Communication Association Convention

Boston, March 16, 1978

Barbara Lieb-Brilhart who planned this session has asked me not only to introduce the panel but to read a paper as well. Since she indicated no particular topic, I shall endeavour to cut a very wide swathe, indeed. To that end, I have entitled my remarks, "On Acknowledging Problems and Implementing Solutions." I had originally thought to call these remarks "On Identifying Problems and Suggesting Solutions" but, alas, such a title would have been doubly misleading -- first, because "on identifying problems" would have indicated problems recently discovered and I am going to talk about problems we have "identified," or should have identified some time ago. Thus, what we in speech communication need to do is fully acknowledge them. And, I have shied away from calling the second part of the paper "suggesting solutions" for much the same reason: the solutions have been "suggested" for some time now. What remains is to determine whether we have the resolve and/or the capacity to implement those solutions.

Together, we could, in very short order, draw up a very long list of agenda items under the rubric of "pressing practical problems." I hope, this afternoon, to discuss two: (1) the pressing need to face up to continued and serious questions raised by administrators about the uniqueness of speech communication and its

CS50209

particular place in the curriculum, and (2) the pressing need to educate our students with a serious concern for their employability.

The first problem I want to acknowledge is the need to concern ourselves with a job market quite different from the one many of us first entered. For a very long time now, some in speech communication have shared the tendency of our sister disciplines, whether from the arts and humanities (such as English and Philosophy) or from the social sciences (such as Sociology and Political Science), to educate our students "without concern for what happens to them when they leave us." This is often the case, whether they leave our departments with a B.A., an M.A. or a Ph.D.

We have only to summon up the sorry spectacle of job placement at the December Modern Language Association meetings in Chicago. Of "the 1,094 Ph.D.'s created in 1976 in English . . . only 42% have landed steady teaching positions."[1] The graduate students on our campus will tell you that matters are still worse this year. As the keynote speaker at last year's Central States convention reminded us, in speech communication we are approaching a period in which not more than one out of ten persons who take a Ph.D. will return to the colleges and universities to perpetuate the work of /their mentors/."[2] "What," Marie Nichols asked in that address, "should this say about the other 90%?"[3] If one inspects the March, 1978 listings in the Speech Communication Association's Placement Bulletin, the accuracy of that number becomes abundantly clear; if anything, it is understated. For example, there were 92 listings for full-time four-year college and university positions (there is no indication of how many, if any, are tenure track positions). Twenty-three of those positions are

theatre-related positions. That leaves us with 69 listings of other kinds.

Anyone from a school with a job opening can tell you of the deluge of applications, often from people whose qualifications only remotely fit the job descriptions. Also, many college and university administrators can tell you of the steady stream of unsolicited job inquiries they are likely to receive. If the shrinking academic job market has taught us anything, it is, as Anita Taylor has reminded us, that we "are going to have to pay more attention to the employability of our graduates."[4]

The bleak job market for M.A. and Ph.D. students has not gone unnoticed, of course, by several groups including state legislators. We are likely to see more headlines such as the ones in Chronicle of Higher Education: "Moves to Curb Graduate Education Provoke Controversy in Washington State" (where Washington State's Council for Post Secondary Education proposed to "close down more than 40 graduate programs in the state")[5] or, "State's Power to Close Ph.D. Programs is Upheld by a New York Court."[6] In the Chronicle, Malcolm Scully calculated last June that "as a result of a review of doctoral programs in New York that began in 1973, 26 of 116 programs have been closed down."[7] Several states are considering asking universities within a state/city to work together, proceeding on the assumption that not all schools need all programs. For example, CUNY, Columbia, Fordham, New School of Social Research, and New York University have agreed to study ways of combining forces in graduate programs.[8] They are supported in this effort by the Ford Foundation, Carnegie Corporation and the Mellon and Sloan Foundations.

Professional organizations themselves are asking, as did an MLA program last December, "Should Half the Ph.D. Programs be Abolished?" And I would guess a very large number of colleges and universities ask their departments quite pointedly, "Where have your graduates since 1974 been employed?" Surely such monitoring will be increased with the possibility of diminishing admissions quotas not for behind when that question cannot be answered "satisfactorily."

I am glad to see that, in contrast to some other disciplines, we in speech communication are spending less time on assigning the blame for the bleak job market, and are, rather, beginning to ask some hard, critical questions: about alternative career opportunities, about how to educate our students to take advantage of those opportunities, and about the impact of these new training programs on our current courses of study.

We are only beginning our question asking -- but we are beginning. My concern here is that we ask the most productive questions. And frankly, I do not believe that high on our list is the question: "Should we abolish half of our degree programs?" (although, for awhile, we might want to impose a moratorium of sorts on new programs). Further, I do not believe high on our list of questions should be "How much should we decrease admissions to the programs that do exist?" (although I believe we have a moral obligation to warn students of the precarious state of the job market). I believe it is incumbent on us to follow the lead of several schools that accept people for graduate work in history (e.g., Johns Hopkins, Princeton and Yale) that include in their letters of acceptance, course bulletins, conversations--the warning that "it might

be difficult . . . to get a job."

An agenda of critical questions might, rather, include the following:

-- Where are the jobs in the future likely to be?

-- What kinds of skills/knowledge do these jobs call for?

-- Whom do we know who can help us answer that question?

-- Are we currently providing those skills?

-- If not, can we redesign programs to provide them?

-- What will happen to some of our more traditional areas of study?

In order to answer the first questions ("Where are the jobs in the future likely to be?" and, "What kinds of skills/knowledge do they call for?") we, in academe, clearly need to seek out advice from our colleagues in other institutional settings: to give us data on and insights into the kinds of non-academic careers there are and into the skills/knowledge those careers require; to help provide our degree programs with contacts in a variegated job market; and to provide alternative role models for our students.

I am glad to see, for example, increased numbers of non-academic speech communication persons on our convention programs. On the ECA program for example, there are not only teachers but persons from CBS, Inc., the National Association of Children's Hospitals, a bank auditor, a director of nursing at a retirement center, an executive from the National Steel Corporation, a representative of a publishing company.

In a month I go to Chicago to attend the Central States meeting which includes as participants, e.g., someone from General Motors Institute, private communications consultants, persons from manage-

ment planning and development firms. At Central, the program entitled "Teaching Communication in Academic and Non-Academic Settings" is chaired by a person from IBM.

The SCA, I am pleased to say, has also begun to accept its institutional obligation to help alert students to alternative career opportunities. Several thousands of our careers brochure, Speech Communication and Careers, have been distributed.[9] An SCA/ERIC paperback, Communication Education for Careers, focuses at greater length on "alternatives to traditional careers for our graduates."[10] At the SCA Washington Convention, the Instructional Development Division, the Applied Communication Section and the Student Section co-sponsored a major program (available on cassette tape), "Communication Training in Business, Industry and Government." Personnel from those fields were on the program.

Although we have made some modest beginnings, we need now to more systematically develop our contacts with non-academic career communities, not only to find out what employment opportunities currently exist but also to let them know how the skills and knowledge of those in speech communication (in its several species) may suit their needs.

At the same time I suspect we need to take a hard look at ourselves: Are we providing marketable skills/knowledge? Can we provide them? Should we redesign our graduate programs or parts of them to more clearly train people for non-academic careers? (Some have clearly already begun to do so. For example, spokesmen for a new Master's level program for the communications analyst at Ohio State University claim that they "can provide an alternative to MBA

programs for the business world and a new career route for the student of speech communication."[11] If we do redesign our programs: What will be the role of "experiential learning?" And how will that learning cycle relate to the University's more typical emphasis on "analytic, reflective, and theoretical studies?"[12] (One asks that question as if they were mutually exclusive modes of learning!).

If we do redesign our graduate programs, what role remains for our traditional studies and for traditional training? I suspect, to answer that question, we'll have to get rid of some rather stale assumptions, to which we've grown accustomed. Let me give you an example--that teaching is the only job M.A.'s and Ph.D.'s in rhetoric and public address are "suited for," are trained for, or seek out. Well, several of our rhetoric and public address students have found jobs outside teaching: as an administrative assistant to a lieutenant governor, at public radio in Washington, D. C., in criminal rehabilitation, and as a newspaper journalist. Writing a dissertation on Cicero, I. A. Richards, the nature of "inherency" in argument, and an examination of the New York State "Right to Life Movement" seems to have done them no irreparable damage on the general job market. Moreover, I have spoken with all of them in the last few months and none appears to be pining away because they have not followed in the precise paths of their academic mentors and none seems to harbor lingering regrets at having pursued classical rhetorical theory, the history of public address or contemporary rhetorical theory. I am not suggesting that these examples are the "rule" but I am suggesting two things: First, that "traditional" ought not be too easily reduced to "impractical" or "unemployable."

In fact, I expect narrow stereotyping for the non-academic job market is no more useful than narrow stereotyping in general. Moreover, we have much to lose if "practicality" becomes the sole criterion for what we teach. Those who want to study Pre-Socratic philosophy, the metaphysical poets, and Medieval history should not be excluded from the phrase "alternative opportunities." One may, after all, so narrowly define "the practical" as to exclude some of the most broadly humanizing of our studies.

We have here merely touched on the task of increasing the employability of our graduates. For example, we have not even mentioned the employability of our undergraduate students. For them, also, the headlines in the Chronicle are not happy--Exhibit One, the 1978 headline "Jobless Rate Increases Among Young Graduates."[13] Nor have we talked about the potentially still more troublesome matter of their "underemployment." For, if the graduate job market statistics are unnerving, one might consider the prediction of the College Placement Council that despite predicted growth in the number of jobs requiring college degrees, "an over supply of about 900,000 college graduates is anticiapted" by 1985.[14] What are we then to tell our graduates until the mid-1980's when the number of college-age people in the population will drop? And if all of this is not unnerving, then one may ponder the still more distant future when, "if futurologists are right, as many as 80 percent of all present jobs will not exist by the year 2,000."[15]

I hope we can soon demonstrate still more clearly that we have both the resolve and capacity to face up to these matters. One way of so doing is to confront the matter boldly, frontally, and with major resources of effort and perhaps money. For example, I

suggest that concurrent with our regional or our national conventions next year we hold a series of meetings that (1) will sort out, much more systematically than this paper has done, the critical issues related to the employability of our graduates; (2) provide us with some information about where our B.A., M.A. and Ph.D. graduates currently hold jobs; (3) provide us with sustained opportunities to talk with persons from a wide variety of career fields to see how people in speech communication do appeal to or can be trained to appeal to them as employees; (4) provide us with wide information about how degree programs around the country have responded to the employment crisis by designing alternative degree programs, by broadening their internship programs, etc.; (5) provide us with the opportunity to talk to futurologists who can better make calculated guesses about what future "job markets" will look like; (6) provide us with opportunities to discuss the impact which overly specific vocational programs may have on humanistic studies (I here, use the term "humanistic studies" broadly); and (7) provide us with the most serious opportunity to examine our capacities to respond to all of this as the "tightening job market within academe itself is prompting fears that low faculty turnovers may deprive colleges of sufficient new blood to carry out major academic reforms."[16] Further, at the May meeting of the SCA Administrative Committee I intend to propose that we set up a task force to begin coping with these questions and to provide us with opportunities to explore, on a national scale, whither we should proceed.

As if we weren't fatigued enough with that exercise in problem-solving, I want to suggest yet another major problem: the pressing

need to face up to continued and serious questions raised by administrators about the uniqueness of speech communication and its particular place in the curriculum. As I observed in SCA's February Spectra: "In the last analysis, nothing will take the place of able and articulate individual responses to administration inquiries, such as those of Alvin Goldberg's at Denver last year."[17] But the Denver experience sounds perilously close to crises that have arisen in departments across the country, some of them quite close to home. At Denver, for example, questions were not raised about departmental enrollments (there, they are increasing); questions were not asked about faculty productivity, national visibility, the graduate program, faculty contributions to public service, faculty campus-wide involvement (these could not, in this instance, be questioned). What was vigorously and persistently asked? "Is speech communication a central area of study to our university?" (Another slippery variant of this is: "How many students would not have come to the university if it had no department of speech communication?"). Frankly, it will do us little good to turn the question to ask about department X or DepartmentY.

There can be no doubt about the seriousness of such administrative" questions. To make absolutely sure of what questions are asked the most often or at least most seriously, I asked several departmental chairpersons from around the country to tackle the problem at the most recent SCA convention. At that program, Robert Kully told us of his questionnaire to system-wide policy makers in the California state system.[18] Among the questions asked in Kully's thoughtful and well documented paper was, "What questions do you have about the speech communication discipline?" He found that

many "administrators question the dicipline and [do] not view it as basic to the university." Of course, Kully is right that often the "most serious criticisms of the discipline [seem] to be the result of misinformation, misconceptions, or lack of understanding about the content of the field." He concludes, however, in the same way as did Goldberg, that, even if departments can prove "quality," it appears to make little difference. The central questions are: What is the content of the discipline? What is its importance ot the curriculum of the University? Etc.

If one is not sobered by the responses given by system-wide administrators answering a mail questionnaire, then we might look at the questions departmental chairpersons are most asked directly. That's what Dwight Freshley tried to find out from questionnaires in 12 Southern states.[19] By far the question chairpersons were most concerned about (as one would expect of beleaguered chairpersons in times of diminishing funds of that myth "level funding") was budget. But the second most asked question focused in one way or another on the nature of the discipline and its role in the curriculum.

As Dennis Gouran points out, "The matter of distinctiveness is, of course, not unique to speech communication because the boundaries of any discipline cannot be sharply drawn. As a result, disciplines typically overlap. Physics overlaps with chemistry, sociology with anthropology, anthropology with psychology, mathematics with logic and so on."[20] Still, for all the talk about interdisciplinary study, "How does speech communication overlap with other disciplines?" is not the question most asked; the question most asked is: "How is speech communication unique?"

Thomas Sloane argued convincingly in 1976 that we would do well to see the interdisciplinary nature of speech communication as an important aspect, not the essential one.[21] I am inclined to agree with Sloane and Gouran that there is "nothing inherent in the subject of human communication that renders it less amenable to the acquisition of distinctiveness than any other subject."[22]

Just as frankly, I do not think we should seek anything more than a cold comfort from some version or another of the following litany:

-- Sociology is often at a loss to say clearly what it is that . . . distinguishes it from other academic disciplines (for they, too, may be driven to search for a mythical "unequivocal identity.")

Or, that

-- some departments of political science are quarreling over whether their orientation should be "normative or behavioral."

Or, that

-- there are "growing schisms" within some psychology departments over their future directions.

For, those are largely viewed by upper level administrators as internal crises. Our "identity crisis" has both internal and external dimensions and the sorry internecine "blood-letting" within some of our most visible departments is, unfortunately, often waged as public spectacle.

Let me make myself quite clear on this point:

-- I am not arguing for returning to narrowness of scope. There is little evidence that our

field, from its Greco-Roman heritage on, has ever suffered from parsimony of design.

-- I am not arguing against innovation or broadened horizons. I, too, look forward to the continuing development of cross-cultural communication, organizational communication, communication and the law and the like. Broadened horizons, however, simple call for breadth of vision; they do not preclude clarity of vision.

-- I am not arguing against pluralism, for it seems both inevitable and useful. But "pluralism" is surely no argument against looking for an internal dynamic that holds (can hold) us together.

I have argued elsewhere that we, in speech communication, "are bound together by an interest in and concern for 'persons communicating'--whether those persons are in the historical past or present; whether those persons are functioning in dyadic, small group, or large group settings; whether they are communicating in face-to-face settings or those mediated by film, TV or 'literary texts.'"[23] We have only to look quantitatively at the numbers of papers at this Boston convention whose fundamental emphasis is on persons communicating--whether the papers are entitled, "The Populist Rhetoric of George Wallace," "Communicating with the Terminally Ill School Age Children and their Parents," "A Case History of a Communication Disaster in a Social Welfare Agency," "Cognitive Styles and Persuasive Styles of Arab, Russian, and American Diplomats," "The Classical Conception of Communication as Dialogue," "The Effectiveness of Television Commercials," or

"Environmental Appearance, Sex, and Status on Interpersonal Evaluations."

I expect, however, that we will have to say still more than that to administrators who ask what we are up to. At the 1977 SCA convention in Washington, D. C. one of the general sessions was entitled "Key Concepts in Speech Communication," at which Dennis Gouran, Wayne Brockriede, and David H. Smith read papers and Marie Nichols and Samuel Becker acted as respondents.[24] Becker correctly assumed that in the original intent of the program was the implicit suggestion by the convention planner (in this case, yours truly) that the explanation of key concepts "may provide one possible set of guides" to identify our center. He rightly suggested that a key concept's approach need not unnecessarily limit explanation, merely, that such an approach does not give equal emphasis to every concept studied by everyone in speech communication. Further, such an approach does not necessarily preclude what Smith termed the "serendipitous discovery" that so often allows us to make major advancements in learning.

Gouran, advocating the development of propositional knowledge, observed: ". . . the real problems facing our discipline appear not to stem from our basic concepts but from the ways in which we try to develop information about them. . . . The crux of the issue is whether or not the right kinds of questions are being asked in enough different areas of concentration so that we can adequately understand the process of communication in its many contexts." Later, Smith argued against developing a single paradigm or "single grand theory," opted for methodological pluralism and suggested that "the unifying factor in a field of study stems

not from common concepts, not the existence of a single theoretical frame, but rather from fundamental questions and values." He suggested that we "start with a central question, 'What happens when people talk to each other'? adding that "'talk' implies symbolic behavior of a wide variety of types and levels, but at the core we begin with the question of communication." On that same program Brockriede suggested that we ought to develop "philosophical presuppositions" dealing with ontological, epistemological and axiological questions. Such programs allow us a variety of ways to talk about central foci. I hope such "richly rewarding" talk continues, for I suspect it is <u>in</u> such serious colloquy that our answers for the questions of administrators are to be found, rather than in more facile and formulaic ways. In sum: Just as the first question posed this afternoon calls for a major and <u>systematic</u> effort, so, too, this second question calls for no less than that. Our future may just depend on how <u>soon</u> and how <u>effectively</u> we articulate answers to these two questions.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Time (Jan., 9, 1978), p. 57. At the MLA convention before that, "A staff member at the job center for foreign-language personnel estimated that in the 3 days of the meeting, his service handled nearly 1,000 applicants for fewer than 400 definite or possible positions. As many as 100 job seekers, he said, were competing for a single spot." Cited in Chronicle of Higher Education (Jan., 10, 1977), p. 1.

[2] Marie H. Nichols, "When You Set Out for Ithaka. . . ," delivered at the 1977 Central States Meeting. This speech is presented in full in the Central States Speech Journal (Fall, 1977), pp. 145-156.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Anita Taylor, Association for Communication Administration Bulletin, (April, 1976).

[5] CHE (June 22, 1977), p. 7.

[6] CHE (Jan., 31, 1977).

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ford Foundation Newsletter (Feb., 1, 1978), p. 5.

[9] Speech Communication and Careers. A brochure prepared by the Executive Committee of the Association for Communication Administration, an affiliate of SCA.

[10] James H. McBath and David T. Burhans, Jr., Communication Education for Careers (SCA/ERIC, 1975).

[11] SCA 1977 Convention Program, p. 100.

[12] Arthur W. Chickering, Experience and Learning: An Introduction to Experiential Learning (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Change Magazine Press, 1977).

[13] CHE (Jan., 30, 1978), p. 4.

[14] Malcolm G. Scully, "Worldwide Job Crisis Faces University Graduates," CHE (Sept. 27, 1976), p. 3.

[15] Change (Sept. 1977), p. 55.

[16] Robert L. Jacobson, "Higher Education and the Job Crisis: Public Disillusement Provokes a Debate," CHE (March 28, 1972), p. 3.

[17] Jane Blankenship, "Presidential Message," Spectra (Feb., 1978), p. 22. See also Alvin Goldberg's letter to Barbara Lieb-Brilhart reprinted in Spectra (Aug., 1977), pp. 7-8 and his statement in Spectra (Oct., 1977), p. 10.

[18] Robert D. Kully, "Administrators' Perceptions of the Disc0 cipline of Speech Communication: Understanding their Misconceptions and Responding to their Myths." A paper delivered at the 1977 Speech Communication Association Convention.

[19] Dwight L. Freshley, "Administrators' Questions, Departments' Answers: Report from the South." A paper delivered at the 1977 SCA Convention.

[20] Dennis Gouran's remarks on the program, "Key Concepts in Speech Communication," at the 1977 SCA Convention.

[21] Thomas Sloane's paper on the program, "Goals of the Association: Three Views," at the 1976 SCA Convention. James McBath makes a strong point, of course, when he argues that speech-communication "provides unique opportunities for collaboration with other departments" in "Graduate Education in Speech-Education," Speech Teacher (Jan., 1970), p. 24.

[22] Gouran, "Key Concepts. . . ."

[23] Blankenship, "Presidential Message," Spectra (Feb., 1978).

[24] This program is also available on cassette tape.